

Invincible Sun: The Cult of Mithras



Pictured: The bull-slaughter scene depicted in sculpture, reproduced from Franz Cumont's *"The Mysteries of Mithra"* (Now in the public domain)

By Matt Hajduk

Mithra¹ is among one of the most ancient and widespread of the archetypal deities venerated by the Indo-European peoples since time immemorial, whose worship once took place within virtually every land where they have dwelt in the Old World-- from the Indian subcontinent in Asia to the farthest fringes of the Roman Empire in Britain. By virtue of such a profoundly far-reaching dissemination of his worship, Mithras may truly be considered a uniquely pan-European god, found within a wide spectrum of cultures and cosmologies sharing a common heritage. His veneration, which continues to this day among Zoroastrians and modern reconstructionist practitioners, spans a history of nearly 3,500 years. Indeed, the god lives on and his significance, although diminished for a time, appears to be reemerging with some force among certain neo-pagan circles.

The oldest historical reference to this ancient deity has been traced back to the 14th century BCE in an inscription found in eastern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) commemorating a treaty between the Indo-European Hittite and Mittani peoples, in which he is invoked as a witness along with the Vedic gods

¹ Mithras is a distinct Roman variation of the god's name. Other regional variations are Mitra (India), Mithra/Mehr/Mihr/Meher (Persia), and Meitras (Greek)

Indra, Varuna and the twin horsemen, the Nasatyas.² The most important source of information on the significance of this god to the Aryan tribes of India, where he was known as Mitra, comes to us from the Rig Veda, which was written around 1500 BCE. Although popular veneration of the Indian Mitra has since faded to obscurity among the devotees of modern Hinduism, he had once been revered as an important deity within their respective pantheon prior to the reformation of their faith, which shifted emphasis towards the primacy of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. In the Indian cosmology Mitra was frequently paired with the god Varuna. Much like his Persian counterpart, Mitra was associated with cattle, which were sacrificed to him by his followers. To his devotees, he was believed to bestow blessings of wide pastures, beautiful women, male children, and large herds, thus attesting to his fertility god aspect.³

From the pages of the Rig Veda one particular hymn (Book III, Hymn LIX) recalls the former prominence in which Mitra figured in the early religious cosmology of India, where it is proclaimed that: *“Mitra, when speaking, stirreth men to labor: Mitra sustaineth both the earth and heaven. Mitra beholdeth men with eyes that close not. To Mitra bring, with holy oil, oblation. Foremost be he who brings thee food, O Mitra, who strives to keep thy sacred Law, Aditya. He whom thou helpest ne’er is slain or conquered, on him, from near or far, falls no affliction.... To Mitra, him most highly to be lauded, offer in fire oblation that he loveth. The gainful grace of Mitra, God, supporter of the race of man, Gives splendour of most glorious fame. Mitra whose glory spreads afar, he who in might surpasses heaven, Surpasses earth in his renown....”*⁴

Georges Dumezil, an early pioneer in the field of comparative Indo-European studies, interpreted the common pairing of the two deities Mitra and Varuna as a representation of a bipartate conception of both earthly and divine sovereignty distinct to the primordial social structure of our race in ancient times.⁵ As a distinct pairing of deities, Mitra and Varuna were both complementary and antithetical to one another in their attributes and functions. Mitra was the day and Varuna was the night.⁶ Mitra was representative of the priestly Brahman caste, whereas Varuna was associated with the Kshatriya warrior caste.⁷ Mitra embodied the aspects of a benevolent, priestly ruler, while Varuna presided over the attributes of a harsh, warlike sovereign.⁸ They represented, in the broadest sense, the dual aspects of cosmic rule and personified the forces which ordered the relationship between the gods and men.

² Paul Kriwaczek, *In Search of Zarathustra: Across Iran and Central Asia To Find The World’s First Prophet*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p.122

³ D. Jason Cooper, *Mithras: Mysteries and Initiation Rediscovered*, (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1996), pp.3-5

⁴ Ralph T. H. Griffith (translator), *The Hymns of the Rgveda*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2004), pp.196-197

⁵ Similarly, the Iranian Mithra was frequently paired with the god Ahura, prior to the monotheistic reformation initiated by the prophet Zoroaster. Georges Dumezil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*, (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p.66

⁶ Dumezil, p.124

⁷ Dumezil, p.178

⁸ Dumezil, p.72

Mithraic Worship in the Persian East

Syncretic traces and living remnants of this once widely venerated god's presence abound throughout the Islamic-Persian East. Even in present day Iran, despite the decidedly Islamic fundamentalist nature of the ruling regime, name traces of the pagan god still abound. In the modern Parsi language, the word *mehr* translates to mean both "love", "sun", and "friend", which hearkens back to the benevolent attributes commonly associated with the god. The mandrake plant, significant for its perceived occult properties, was considered sacred to him.⁹ Likewise, libations of the intoxicating Haoma¹⁰ juice were offered in his honor.¹¹ In the Avestan (Old Persian) language, the name of Mithra was synonymous with the word "contract", signifying his role as a god of justice and truth. As a complement to this role, he was esteemed as the mediator between the divine godhead and humanity.¹² Attesting to this quality as an omnipotent and righteous judge of men, Mithra was said to have a thousand eyes, a thousand ears, and ten thousand spies which symbolized the infallible ability of the god to discern truth from



Pictured: Mithraic worship in the Hellenized Persian successor states of Asia Minor. Bas-relief depicting pact between earthly sovereign Antiochus I of Commagene and Mithra (from Cumont)

falsehood, and it was believed no wrongdoing committed would ever escape his notice.¹³ Franz Cumont elegantly summed up this important role played by Mithras in his treatise on the god's significance in this regard: "*It was Mithra, the protector of truth, that presided over the judgment of the soul after its decease. It was he, the mediator, that served as a guide to his faithful ones in their courageous ascent to the empyrean; he was the celestial father that received them in his resplendent mansion, like children who had returned from a distant voyage.*"¹⁴

In the Zoroastrian faith, one of the few surviving unbroken Indo-European religions of antiquity which successfully resisted total decimation at the hands of Abrahamaic monotheist aggression, Mithra continues to hold a high position of reverence as the chief *yazata*, or "worshipful one", in service to the divine godhead, Ahura Mazda.¹⁵ Although he is subordinate to the supreme deity, Mithra is exalted as a being equally worthy of veneration, thus setting him apart from the other *yazatas*.¹⁶ This ancient solar deity is still celebrated within the Iranian Autumn equinox festival, *Mehregan*, which marks the beginning of the month of Mehr in the Persian solar calendar, which still bears his name.¹⁵ Likewise, the sixteenth day (or middle) day of every month was

⁹ Payam Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World*, (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2005), p.5

¹⁰ Apparently, this is the equivalent of the Indian Soma.

¹¹ Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p.6

¹² Kriwaczek, pp.122-123

¹³ Cooper, p.6

¹⁴ Cumont, p.145

¹⁵ John R. Hinnells, *Persian Mythology*, (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1988), p.49

¹⁶ Nabarz, p.4

¹⁵ Nabarz, pp.158-159

considered sacred to him.¹⁶ Modern adherents of Zoroastrianism still practice their sacred rite in a consecrated space within their fire temples known as the *Dar-e-Mehr*, or “Mithra's gateway”¹⁷. Zoroastrian priests continue to yield the mace of Mithra as a symbol of their conviction in the god's assistance on behalf of their continuous struggle against the supreme embodiment of evil, Angra Mainyu.¹⁸ As a sun god, the hooked solar cross (swastika) was sacred to him, known as the *gardun-e-mehr*, or “Wheel of Mithra”, a preeminent and ancient symbol common throughout virtually all Indo-European folkways in various forms.¹⁹

Within the pages of the *Avesta*, one the holy books of the Zoroastrian creed, there is found a deeply symbolic hymn, paying homage to the manifold aspects of Mithra, known as the *Mehr Yasht*, which testifies to the important role this divine figure has long occupied within pre-Islamic Persian religious cosmology.²⁰ Throughout this fervent devotional hymn, Mithra is frequently referred to as “*lord of the wide pastures... sleepless, and ever awake*” reminding his devotees of his role as omnipresent fertility god, protector and arbiter of justice. Mithra was considered to have been the patron deity and bringer of victory to the Persian tribes in ancient times, a sky-father who was invoked to assure their prosperity, protection and aid in times of both war and peace. Indeed, he is hailed as: “*Who first of the heavenly gods reaches over the Hara, before the undying swift-horsed sun; who, foremost in golden array, takes hold of the beautiful summits, and from thence looks over the abode of the Aryans* with a beneficent eye.*”²¹ Mithra, in his war god manifestation is called upon as “*a god of high renown and old age, whom wide-hoofed horses carry against the havocking hosts, against enemies coming in battle array, in the strife of conflicting nations.*”²² In this respect, he is venerated as “*victory-making*”, “*army governing*”, and “*power-wielding*”.²³ From the historical record, we know that this hymn reflects a traditional practice among soldiers of the Persian army, who offered prayers to invoke the assistance of Mithra to assure victory in battle to the faithful. One Roman historian, Quintus Rufus, in his biography of Alexander the Great, described a ceremony conducted by the Persian king before sending his forces into battle, wherein he, alongside “*with his generals and staff passed around the ranks of the armed men, praying to the sun and Mithra and the sacred eternal fire.*”²⁴ Along with terrestrial victory, Mithra is also a god of spiritual victory, as a lord of hosts who wages tireless war upon the forces of evil, personified in the Persian cosmology as the Daevas, who he fearlessly smites.²⁵

¹⁶ Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.5

¹⁷ Kriwaczek, p.123

¹⁸ Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, *Persian Myths*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p.14

¹⁹ It is extremely tiresome to feel compelled by necessity to state this among presumably educated, free-thinking readers, but the spiritual and cultural significance of this powerful, evocative symbol far predates and indeed overshadows the modern negative politically charged connotations of its brief association with the 12 year regime of National Socialist Germany. I hope my readers will have the common sense to recognize this. M. Sadeq Nazmi-Afshar, “Iran, Origins of Aryan Peoples”, *The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies (CAIS)* [Available online: http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Anthropology/aryans_origin.htm]

²⁰ Nabarz, p.165

* The ancient Persians referred to themselves by this name, from which the modern nation of Iran receives its name. Likewise, in the same manner Ireland is derived from the word “Eire”, also an etymological permutation of “Aryan”.

²¹ Nabarz, p.168

²² Nabarz, p.173

²³ Nabarz, p.171

²⁴ Hinnells, p.76

²⁵ Nabarz, p.175

Attesting to Dumézil's interpretation of the Vedic Mitra as a divine representation of earthly sovereignty, various rulers within the Persian world adopted *theophorous*, or “god-bearing” names, derived from the sacred name of Mithra, in an attempt to legitimate their reign through reverence to the Sun god and to imply a special spiritual-terrestrial relationship with his cosmic reign.²⁶ Following the fragmentation of Alexander the Great's vast empire, in the Hellenized Persian successor states of the Near East six separate rulers held the name of Mithridates, meaning “gift of Mithra”.²⁷ To this effect, Mithra was considered the upholder and protector of the kingly fortune and divine glory (Persian-*khvarnah* or *farr*) which he would bestow upon a worthy monarch who had retained his legitimacy through righteous rule and religious observance.²⁸

The Mithraic Mysteries

According to the Roman historians Plutarch and Appian, the Mithraic cult made its first inroads within the Occidental world around 67 BCE, with the arrival of Cilician pirates from Asia Minor in Greece.²⁹ By the 2nd century BCE Mithraism had become strongly rooted in the Roman Empire, and by the 3rd century BCE it had reached its apex.³⁰ During its heyday, the cult of Mithras flourished throughout the entire Roman Empire, comprising a vast area which extended from the Germanic frontiers in the Danube and Rhine valley regions, to Hadrian's Wall in northern England, to the urban civilian centers in Rome proper, throughout eastern Europe in regions now comprising modern Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria, to the Near Eastern territories of Palestine and Syria, and in parts of North Africa-- as evidenced by the myriad of Mithraic sites uncovered by archeologists throughout these regions.³¹

The Roman cult of Mithras gained widespread appeal among the soldiers of the Legions, although it also drew a large constituency of adherents from merchants and state officials.³² Individuals of slave status were also initiated into the Mysteries.³³ Mithraism was the last official pagan state religion of the Roman Empire for a brief time before the conversion of Constantine and the violent suppression of indigenous Indo-European religious practices under monotheist Christian rule.³⁴ As a religious community, Mithraism functioned as an esoteric mystery cult with a hierarchical initiatory system. Religious services and initiation rites took place within man-made subterranean grottos and caves known as Mithraeum (plural- *Mithraea*). Having been sealed off from the mundane sensory distractions of the outside world, these spiritual sanctuaries were illuminated by oil lamps and braziers, producing an otherworldly and ambient backdrop to accompany the mysterious rites which took place within.³⁵ Recurring wall reliefs and paintings which frequently adorn various Mithraea reveal that a common underlying sacred narrative of the life and deeds of Mithras existed among his adherents. The mystery

²⁶ Cumont, p.8

²⁷ Clauss, p.4

²⁸ Curtis, p.14

²⁹ Cooper, p.11-13

³⁰ G. R. Watson, *The Roman Soldier*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.132

³¹ Hinnells, p.78

³² Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.7

³³ Clauss, p.40

³⁴ Nabarz, p.11

³⁵ Clauss, p.48

cults, of which the Mithraic religion was but one of many existing throughout the Graeco-Roman world at the time, promised spiritual salvation and rebirth through an initiatory process of inner illumination. The iconography and motifs of the sacred narrative provided allegorical keys to unlocking deeper spiritual truths for those who proceeded through this path of spiritual evolution. Unfortunately, much of the inner doctrines of the Mithraic Mysteries are now lost to us³⁶, and although while we may ascertain a great deal of what these motifs represented symbolically, we have but a fragmentary, imperfect picture of what was once a complete theology.

December 25th, the date of the winter solstice¹, was long revered as a holy day in the ancient world far before it carried any distinctly Christian connotations. In Mithraic cosmology it was associated with the divine birth of the god and was known to the Romans as the *Dies Natalis Solis Invictus*, or “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun”. This birth date of the god is consistent within both Persian and Roman traditions. In Persian myth, it was on this day that Mithras was born of the divine virgin mother goddess Anahita in what has been described as a cave or grotto, where he was attended by shepherds that presented the divine child with gifts. Some adherents of the Zoroastrian faith hold the belief that Mithra was born in 272 BCE, and that he was of the lineage of the prophet Zoroaster², having been miraculously conceived from his living seed which was preserved within the waters of Lake Hamun in Sistan, Iran.³ Initiates of the Roman mystery cult professed a cryptically esoteric doctrine of the god's miraculous birth, whereby he had been a “god generated from a rock” (*theos ek petras, to petrogenos Mithra*).⁴ Although most people in the modern era associate this day as a Christian holiday, it was not until the 4th century CE that the Church began to commemorate it as the supposedly “historic” day of Jesus' birth.⁵ Statuary and carved reliefs which have been discovered in Mithraic grottos depicting the “rock-birth”⁶ show the young god emerging from a stone holding a globe, which has been taken to symbolize and anticipate the destiny of Mithras as the divine *kosmokrator*, or “ruler of the cosmos.”⁷

In his fertility god aspect, various depictions exist within numerous temples involving a scene in which Mithras, armed with a bow, performs a miracle by firing an arrow into a rock which releases a hidden stream of water.⁸ This theme of the “freeing of the waters”, whereby the archetypal hero performs a benevolent act in order to liberate the latent generative life-giving forces in nature thus bestowing

³⁶ One fascinating late liturgical text of Graeco-Egyptian origin is found within the great Paris Magic Papyrus 574, housed in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, which outlines what appears to be a complex astral initiation rite. For an English translation, see G.R.S. Mead, *A Mithraic Ritual*, (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1997)

¹ In the old calendar the traditional date of the winter solstice fell upon this specific day, rather than on the 22nd as it is now situated in the modern era.

² In Persian lore, Zoroaster himself was purported to have been born through the intercession of divine forces, having been conceived within the virgin womb of his mother by a god, and he had prophesied that a savior was to arise from his lineage who would likewise be miraculously conceived. Esme Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap*, (London: Rider & Company, 1958), p.82

³ Nabarz, pp.18-19

⁴ Julius Evola, *The Path of Enlightenment In The Mithraic Mysteries*, (Edmonds, WA: Holmes Publishing Group, 1994), p.11

⁵ Nabarz, pp.47-48

⁶ An alternate version of the “rock-birth” scene depicts the young god Mithras holding a torch and a dagger. David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35

⁷ Ulansey, p.95

⁸ Nabarz, p.26

fertility and sustenance upon the once-desolate land, is rooted in the recurring primordial myth and ritual of the Indo-European religious worldview.⁹ A cryptic graffito found within the Santa Prisca Mithraeum seems to allude to this frequently recurring motif, referring to a “*rockbound spring that fed the twin brothers with nectar*”, which may provide a fragmentary clue into the role of the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates within the partially reconstructed narrative.¹⁰ As the sustainer of life and giver of fertility, Mithras was known as *fons perennis*, the “ever-flowing spring.”¹¹

What follows next is a bull hunt, involving a prolonged struggle between Mithras and the beast, culminating in a blood sacrifice within a cave.¹² The central icon of the Roman Mithraic religion was that of the bull-slaying scene, known as the *Tauroctony*, which was depicted in the solemn subterranean



Pictured: A detailed Tauroctony scene, from the Louvre (public domain, courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org)

places of worship made sacred to the god.¹³ The god kneels in triumph over the subdued bull, with a blade thrust into the animal's neck, as it convulses in the throes of death. Mithras' head is turned away from the act, facing the god Helios present in cameo in the upper left hand corner, whose rays of light emanate towards him. The goddess Luna is present in cameo to the upper right hand side, often looking away from the act. A dog and a serpent consume the blood emanating from the sacrificial wound, while a scorpion latches its claws upon the bull's testes. In various portrayals a cup and lion are present near the wound as well. A raven perches nearby on the right-hand side beneath Helios. On each side of Mithras is an identical torchbearer, both of which are adorned in a similar manner to the god with Persian trousers and a Phrygian cap. The torchbearer to the left, Cautes, holds a torch pointing upwards, and to the right is Cautopates, whose torch is pointed downwards.

The general consensus among modern scholars is that the rich symbolism of the *Tauroctony* scene is primarily astrological in nature. This is evident in the fact that various depictions of the *Tauroctony* are encircled by the zodiac.¹⁴ Mithras, as a representation of the Sun, possessed a secret variation of his name, *Meitras*, which was revealed to initiates. This solar symbolism is all the more evident, when “*Meitras*” is broken down cabbalistically in accord with the numerical values associated with the letters of the Greek alphabet, yielding a sum total is 365, the entire span of a solar year.¹⁵ One scholar, David Ulansey, in his efforts to uncover a link between Mithraic iconography and astrological

⁹ Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.25

¹⁰ Nabarz, p.7

¹¹ Clauss, p.72

¹² Clauss, p.74

¹³ Cooper, p.59

¹⁴ Ulansey, p.16

¹⁵ Cooper, p.155

symbolism, hypothesized that the Tauroctony was representative of a star map depicting the celestial equator when the Spring equinox was in the constellation Taurus.¹⁶ With this, each of the figures present in the scene represents a specific constellation. The raven symbolizes Corvus, the lion is Leo, the cup is Crater, the scorpion is Scorpius, the dog is Canis Minor, the snake is Hydra, and the bull is Taurus.¹⁷ According to Ulansey, the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates represented the procession of the Spring and the Autumn equinoxes, respectively.¹⁸ As personifications of the yearly passing of the seasons, the twin torchbearers also embodied the cyclical forces of life and death, waking and waning, ascent and descent.¹⁹ The cave symbolized the cosmos whereby souls descended into genesis and ascended into the immortal realms. For initiates, this star map provided a critical astrological calendar and guiding beacon by which they aspired to spiritually ascend at a predetermined point towards the ultimate goal of celestial rebirth and spiritual salvation within the eternal light of the heavens.²⁰

Mithras was worshiped as a savior god, whose sacrificial shedding of the blood of the bull depicted in the *Tauroctony* constituted a redemptive act performed for the benefit of man. Attesting to this conviction felt by his followers, in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum, a graffito proclaims: “*And us you have saved by shedding the eternity-giving blood.*”²¹ The bull sacrifice is at once a transformational and regenerative act, by which the fertility-bestowing life force of the universe is released. Various versions of the *Tauroctony* scene depict a cluster of grapes or alternately, heads of wheat, which spring forth from the sacrificial wound on the bull’s neck. Frequently, the tip of the tail is shown sprouting wheat as well.²² This crucial cosmic act, which liberated the latent life forces of creation, gave the ancients reason to refer to Mithras as “lord of genesis.”²³ Within this motif, there seems to be a strong correspondence with messianic beliefs stemming from ancient Persian lore, the echoes of which may have some influence on the Roman cult’s religious worldview and doctrine of salvation and resurrection. According to a Mazdean prophecy, at the end of the world, the savior, known as the *saoshyant*, will slaughter a bull, and from this sacrifice its fat will be mingled with the sacred Haoma, which will provide an immortality-giving drink to the elect.²⁴

From Mithraic iconography, there is an investiture scene, in which the sun god Helios kneels in submission in front of the Mithras, the Unconquered Sun who stands over him. In this scene, Mithras has placed his right hand upon the forehead of Helios, while holding a shoulder of the slaughtered bull in his left hand.²⁵ What follows is a rapprochement scene between Mithras and Helios, whereby the two stand facing one another locking hands as if sealing a bond or covenant.²⁶ The two partake of a sacred banquet, akin to a sort of “last supper” on earth, followed by an ascent to Heaven where Mithras travels with Helios in his chariot in order to fulfill his divinely ordained role as *kosmokrator*.²⁷ Corresponding

¹⁶ Ulansey, p.55

¹⁷ Ulansey, pp.51-52

¹⁸ Ulansey, p.64

¹⁹ G. R. S. Mead, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, (Elibron Classics, 2005), p.74

²⁰ Hinnells, pp.86-88

²¹ Cooper, p.71

²² Clauss, pp.79-81

²³ Ulansey, p.61

²⁴ Mead, pp.76-77

²⁵ Ulansey, p.104

²⁶ Mead, p.87

²⁷ Nabarz, p.27

to this function as “cosmic ruler”, various depictions have been uncovered which place Mithras in a role exactly analogous to that of the god Atlas, upon whose shoulders the created world is balanced.²⁸

Within many Mithraic temples there exists a mysterious and striking figure, depicted in various statuary and carved reliefs, which seems to have played a significant role in the revealed mysteries of the cult. This figure, often referred to by scholars as the *Leontocephaline*, or “lion-headed one”, is depicted as a male figure adorned with four angelic wings, with the head of a fierce lion. This enigmatic god is often shown standing upon a sphere representing the cosmos, upon whose body a serpent is intertwined. It holds keys in each hand, or alternately two torches, which symbolized the initiatory unlocking of the spiritual mysteries of the cult and inner illumination.²⁹ Many of the surviving statues were designed so that during certain rites and ceremonies, fire could be made to emit from the roaring mouth of the lion head, which surely must have provided a dramatic effect within the dark sanctuary of the Mithraeum.³⁰ It has been speculated that this figure was an archetypal representation of the spiritual qualities embodied within those who obtained the rank of *Leo*.³¹ Generally, it is thought that this enigmatic deity represented the concept of infinite time, and therefore was similar in certain respects to the Hellenic gods Kronos and Aeon, as well as the Persian Zervan Akarana.³² Some scholars have identified this deity as analogous to the Orphic god Phanes, whose representations sometimes take the place of the lion-headed god in certain temples.³³ It is possible that in the esoteric doctrines of Mithraism, this figure may have been understood syncretically as a manifestation of Mithras, which we may gather from a votive inscription discovered within a temple in Rome dedicated to *Deus Sol Mithras Phanes*.³⁴



Pictured: The sacred banquet of Mithras and Helios, from the Louvre. (public domain, courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org)

The initiatory structure of the Mithraic cult was sevenfold in nature, with a corresponding system of degrees, which reflected the neophyte's struggle towards the ultimate aim of attainment of the divine solar principle. These seven ascending grades of illumination were, respectively: *Corax* (Raven), *Nymphus* (Bride), *Miles* (Soldier), *Leo* (Lion), *Perses* (Persian), *Heliodromus* (Messenger of the Sun or Sun-Runner), and *Pater* (Father).³⁵ Initiates of the Mithraic mysteries were known as *sacrati*, or “Consecrated Ones”, which attested to the special spiritual relationship which they sought to cultivate with the god, as they ascended on their path to transcendent revelation.³⁶ Each Mithraic community was led by a *Pater*, who functioned as sacred hierophant to his fellow members, who themselves referred to one another as

²⁸ Clauss, p.87

²⁹ Nabarz, pp.27-29

³⁰ Clauss, p.163

³¹ Cooper, p.127

³² Cumont, p.105

³³ Ulansey, pp.120-121

³⁴ Clauss, p.70

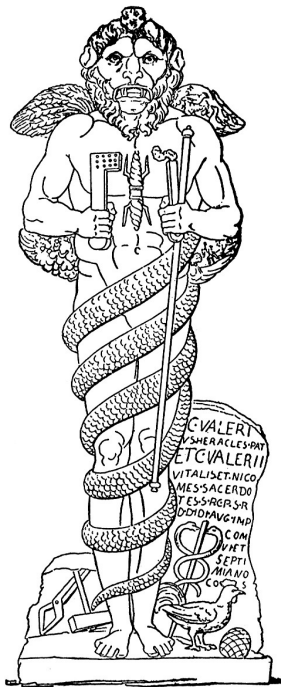
³⁵ Cooper, p.113

³⁶ Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1999), p.59

frater, or “brother.”³⁷ On an astrological level, the initiatory grades of the Mithraic mysteries were representative of the seven celestial spheres through which the aspirant sought to spiritually ascend on his journey to the ultimate divine principle. From the 3rd century Christian writer and Church father Origen (citing the work of his arch-polemicist, the pagan Celsus) we learn that: “...there is a symbol of the two orbits in heaven, the one being that of the fixed stars and the other that assigned to the planets, and of the soul’s passage through these. The symbol is this. There is a ladder with seven gates and at its top an eighth gate.”³⁸

Mithraic initiates partook of a sacramental meal of bread and wine mixed with water, which strengthened their communal bond of *agape*, or brotherly comradeship.³⁹ On a symbolic level, this rite was in commemoration of the sacred banquet which Mithras celebrated with Helios before his ascension into Heaven.⁴⁰ Murals found within various Mithraeum depicting this sacred communion rite reveal that the bread served was occasionally in the form of round wafers or cakes with a cross marked upon them.⁴¹ In this case, the cross, which since time immemorial has first and foremost been a

symbolic of the divine solar principal, represented the intimate communion with the redemptive Indo-European sun god, whose essence the elect sought to spiritually partake of. The sacred meal was reserved for initiates who had at least risen above the rank of *Corax*. Lower-level initiates nevertheless played a role in the feast as servants, although they themselves did not partake of the meal, thus attesting to the hierarchical meritocracy underlying the structure of the Mithraic religious community. These privileges and duties according to rank should come as no surprise given the military background of many followers of the cult.⁴²



**Pictured: The
Leontocephaline (from
Cumont)**

Within the practices of the Mithraic cult there were three distinct forms of baptismal rites which initiates underwent in order to purify their souls on their ascending path to the divine. Two of these are immediately striking in their similarity to later Christian practices: the sprinkling of water and marking of a solar cross upon the initiate's forehead, as well as purification through total immersion in living water.⁴³ Lastly, there was the intense baptismal rite known as the *Taurobolium*, a reenactment of Mithras' crucial act, where the initiate was bathed in the blood of a slaughtered bull in order to be "born again" and thus able to partake of the regenerative energy of the divine life force which was thought to be released by the sacrifice.⁴⁴

The prospective neophyte was made to endure a series of grueling hardships and trials of endurance before he was deemed worthy to attain initiation into

³⁷ Cooper, p.23

³⁸ Ulansey, p.18

³⁹ S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975), p.123

⁴⁰ Cumont, p.160

⁴¹ Cooper, p.142

⁴² Cooper, 21-23

⁴³ Wynne-Tyson, p.43

⁴⁴ Angus, p.46

the cult. In order to obtain entrance, a candidate had to secure the blessing of the Pater of that particular Mithraic community. From a fourth century text, it is recorded that during the initiation of a new candidate, the neophyte was blindfolded and his hands were bound with chicken guts. He was then made to take a blind leap, or alternately was thrown, over a ditch filled with water. At the end of this ritual, his bonds would be cut off by a man with a sword who was designated as his Liberator.⁴⁵ Finally, having undergone the ceremonial ordeals, a new initiate was accepted into the community after clasping hands in solidarity with the *Pater*, which was a ritual reenactment of the rapprochement reached between Mithras and Helios in the sacred narrative. For this reason initiates of the Mithraic mysteries were referred to as *syndexioi*, or “those united by the handshake”.⁴⁶

The first degree of initiation within the Mithraic cult was that of *Corax*, which corresponded with the planet Mercury, and the symbols of this rank were the raven, the cup, and the caduceus. It was also associated with the constellation Corvus, which was represented by the raven present within the *Tauroctony*.⁴⁷ From what depictions discovered within various Mithraea indicate, on some occasions *Coraxes* ritualistically donned ceremonial masks in the likeness of ravens.⁴⁸ The raven, as a carrion bird, symbolized the ritual “death” of the initiates’ old selves as they were “reborn” into their new spiritual path within the framework of the Mithraic worldview.⁴⁹ Also of great significance is the role frequently played by ravens within mythology as messengers of the Sun god.⁵⁰

The second degree, *Nymphus*, corresponded to the planet Venus, and was represented by the symbols of the lamp, a bridal veil or diadem, and a mirror or torch. These symbols have been taken to represent a process of introspection and self-examination which the initiate was required to undergo, as they grasped towards higher, hidden esoteric truths.⁵¹ This may have also signified a sort of moral self-purification as they sought to cultivate themselves as spiritual warriors of the god of light. As this cult was notably strictly males-only, the word, which normally existed in the feminine form as “nymphé” was presented in the masculine as “nymphos”.⁵² This striking paradox has led certain scholars to place emphasis on the double meaning of the word *Nymphus*, which could also be taken in another context to describe a concealed “secret”.⁵³ An alternate translation of *Nymphus* has been interpreted to denote a “bee chrysalis”, which alludes to the embryonic nature of the initiate who has obtained this degree, who will someday be worthy to partake of the honey sacrament reserved for the higher grades.⁵⁴ From a surviving text attributed to Firmicus Maternus, we learn that these second-tier initiates were given the ritual greeting: “*Hail Nymphus, hail New Light.*”⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Cooper, p.144

⁴⁶ Clauss, p.105

⁴⁷ Cooper, p.117

⁴⁸ Clauss, p.133

⁴⁹ Nabarz, p.30

⁵⁰ Nabarz, p.34

⁵¹ Cooper, p. 120-121

⁵² Hinnells, p.84

⁵³ Cooper, p.121

⁵⁴ Nabarz, p.34

⁵⁵ Clauss, p.134

The third degree, *Miles*, corresponded to the planet Mars, and was represented by the symbols of the lance, helmet and soldiers kitbag.⁵⁶ The *Miles* initiation ritual was an affirmation of militant fidelity to the god, and the ethical principles of which he was the highest embodiment. Indeed, as Cumont put it: "*The Soldier (miles) formed part of the sacred militia of the invincible god and waged war under his direction on the powers of evil.*"⁵⁷ The initiate was marked in the forehead with a solar cross. As a test of character, he was offered a crown which was presented before him on the edge of a sword, symbolizing base materialism and the temptations of the ego, which he would then spurn, declaring: "*Mithras alone is my crown!*"⁵⁸ Alternately, the initiate was offered a proffered laurel wreath, which was symbolic of earthly victory, which he would push away, saying: "*My god is my victory!*"⁵⁹

The fourth degree, *Leo*, corresponded to the planet Jupiter, and was represented by a fire shovel, thunderbolt, and sistrum. The fire shovel was symbolic of purification, by which the initiate sought to "burn away" his impure, base mortal aspects in order to attain spiritual immortality. The thunderbolt was a symbol of sovereignty, hearkening back to the weapon wielded by Jupiter which assured his triumph over the Titans, who were the mythical personification of chaotic, unrestrained forces. The sistrum rattle most likely served a ritual purpose, and may have been used to create a sound reminiscent of distant thunder or the humming of bees.⁶⁰ In a manner similar to the ceremonial raven masks worn at times by *Coraxes*, some depictions found within Mithraea indicate that *Leos* also wore lion masks during certain rites. *Leo* initiates partook of a honey sacrament, by which they sought to cleanse themselves of evil. According to the Roman historian Porphyry: "*So in the Lion mysteries, when honey is poured instead of water for purification on the hands of the initiates, they are exhorted to keep them pure from everything distressing, harmful and loathsome; and since he is an initiate of fire, which has a cathartic effect, they use on him a liquid related to fire, rejecting water as inimical to it. They use honey to purify the tongue from all guilt.*"⁶¹ Regarding the religious and ritual function of the *Leo* initiates, an inscription preserved within the Santa Prisca Mithraeum contains the enigmatic proclamation: "*Receive the incense-burners, Father, receive the Lions, Holy One, through whom we offer incense, through whom we offer ourselves consumed!*"⁶²

The fifth degree, *Perses*, corresponded to the Moon, and was represented by a hooked sword, a sickle, and an eight-rayed star. This particular rank may be an allusion to the son of the mythic hero Perseus, who was held by tradition to have been the founder of the Persian people. The hooked sword, or harpe, is significant as the weapon used by Perseus to behead the fierce gorgon Medusa.⁶³ This has been taken by some to symbolize the inner eradication and cleansing away of the base, impure aspects of the initiate's ego, or lower self.⁶⁴ In the same manner as members of the *Leo* grade beneath them, the *Perses* initiates ritualistically purified their hands with honey.⁶⁵ Members of the *Perses* rank were referred to as "keeper of the fruits", which may have referred to specific divine arcana which they were

⁵⁶ Cooper, p.122

⁵⁷ Cumont, p.154

⁵⁸ Arkon Daraul, *Secret Societies: A History*, (New York: MJF Books, 1989), p.78

⁵⁹ Cooper, p.32

⁶⁰ Cooper, p.125-126

⁶¹ Clauss, p.135

⁶² Nabarz, p.36

⁶³ Cooper, p.132-133

⁶⁴ Nabarz, p.37

⁶⁵ Clauss, p.136

designated as guardians of, or perhaps some other important administrative duty within the community.⁶⁶

The sixth degree, *Heliodromus*, corresponded to the Sun, and was represented by the whip wielded by the Sun god, a torch, and the radiant crown-like nimbus which emanates from his head. The *Heliodromus* served as deputy to the *Pater*, and had administrative duties. In the event of an absence, incapacity, or untimely death of a Mithraic community's *Pater*, the *Heliodromus* was expected to assume his role.⁶⁷

The seventh degree, *Pater*, corresponded to the planet Saturn, and was represented by the Phrygian cap of Mithras, the staff and ring, as well as a hooked sword or sickle.⁶⁸ Indeed, through these symbols of spiritual sovereignty, the *Pater* functioned as the earthly representative of Mithras, and therefore the religious leader of each community.⁶⁹ Presiding over the many *Paters* who led their respective Mithraic communities throughout the empire was a religious figurehead designated as the *Pater Patrum*, or “Father of Fathers”. Surviving graffiti from this era attests that such a patriarch was elected among a council of ten superiors, which is reminiscent of the manner in which the Catholic Pope continues to be nominated by a college of cardinals.⁷⁰

The relationship between early Christian missionaries and the followers of Mithras was characterized by bitter enmity and rivalry. The observable numerous and striking similarities between the mythic birth, life, and ascent to Heaven of Mithras, and that of the Biblical Jesus, along with certain similarities in various rituals and doctrines, presented a direct challenge to Christianity's claim to the exclusivity and purity of its spiritual theology and sacred motifs, especially since Mithraism had long preceded it. Indeed, as Franz Cumont aptly noted: “*The struggle between the two rival religions was the more stubborn as their characters were the more alike.*”⁷¹

Early Church fathers were uncomfortable with these correspondences, as they threatened to invalidate much of their own articles of faith as having been anything other than a late-coming Jewish adaptation of the solar mystery cults of pagan antiquity. Their only recourse, albeit an intellectually repulsive one, was to claim authenticity through the wild assertion that any previous correspondences were the product of diabolical mimicry. In other words, it was proposed that the Devil, in his anticipation of Christ's future role as Messianic figure, had created impersonations of the “one true faith” in order to mislead spiritual seekers. Such was the rhetoric of Church father Tertullian who declared: “*The devil, whose business is to pervert the truth, mimics the exact circumstances of the Divine Sacraments. He baptizes his believers and promises forgiveness of sins from the Sacred Fount, and thereby initiates them into the religion of Mithras. Thus he celebrates the oblation of bread, and brings in the symbol of the resurrection. Let us therefore acknowledge the craftiness of the devil, who copies certain things of those that be Divine.*”⁷² The pagan polemicist Celsus, who was a contemporary of the early Church

⁶⁶ Cooper, p.153

⁶⁷ Cooper, p.134

⁶⁸ Cooper, p.138

⁶⁹ Clauss, p.137

⁷⁰ Cooper, p.136

⁷¹ Cumont, pp.190-191

⁷² Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was The “Original Jesus” A Pagan God?*, (New York: Three Rivers

fathers and a fervent critic of what was then the new Christian faith dismissed it as a pale reflection of a longstanding spiritual tradition: *"Now the Christians pray that after their toil and strife here below they shall enter the kingdom of heaven, and they agree with the ancient systems that there are seven heavens and that the way of the soul is through the planets. That their system is based on very old teachings may be seen from similar beliefs in the old Persian Mysteries associated with the cult of Mithras."*⁷³

In spite of the best attempts in his own day to discredit and deconstruct Mithraism as a demonic mockery of Christianity, no less than Tertullian himself was grudgingly forced to acknowledge the widely renowned public virtue which was common among initiates of the cult. In his *De Corona* he had in fact used them as an exemplar by which to upbraid his fellow Christians for their own moral shortcomings when he said: *"You, his fellow-warriors, should blush when exposed by any soldier of Mithra. When he is extolled in the cave, he is offered the crown, which he spurns. And he takes his oath upon this moment, and is to be believed. Through the fidelity of his servants the devil puts us to shame."*⁷⁴ In their day, Mithrasians were held in high renown for their scrupulousness in business and their bravery in battle.⁷⁵ In an era of moral decline, where social vices such as infidelity and divorce were on the increase, devotees of the god were only permitted to marry once, thus hearkening back to the value placed upon the sanctity of the family held in high esteem during the golden age period of the early Roman Republic.⁷⁶ Indeed, the virtues of the Mithraic faith, while paralleling and predating a great deal of things later falsely considered distinct to Christianity (which had itself borrowed greatly from Persian dualist mysticism and the iconography of the Mystery cults) was better suited to the ethos and integral spirituality of European man.

Like the virtues of the Roman legions who embraced the cult in such large numbers, the ethics of Mithraism were suited for men of action-- men of conviction, self-discipline and moral courage. In the words of G. R. S. Mead, *"Mithra was a warrior and a God of warriors; He was not only General of the celestial militia of the Good Fight, but also Protector of all brave deeds and chivalrous adventures."*⁷⁷ Cumont remarked similarly: *"In an epoch of anarchy and emasculation, its mystics found in its precepts both stimulus and support. The conviction that the faithful ones formed part of a sacred army charged with sustaining with the Principle of Good the struggle against the power of evil, was singularly adapted to provoking their most pious efforts and transforming them into ardent zealots.... Mithraism, in fact, satisfied alike both the intelligence of the educated and the hearts of the simple-minded."*⁷⁸ Far from being simple monastics praying in humility for the triumph of Light, the followers of Mithras were active participants and brothers-in-arms in the god's struggle against the Evil One and all of its manifestations, both in the physical and spiritual worlds.

Press), p.28

⁷³ Freke and Gandy, p.73

⁷⁴ Daraul, p.79

⁷⁵ Cooper, p.32

⁷⁶ Cooper, p.19

⁷⁷ Mead, p.39

⁷⁸ Cumont, pp.147-148

Despite the fact that Mithraism was essentially the veneration of a foreign deity of a nation (Persia) which the Roman Empire considered its mortal foe, it nevertheless partook of a broader Indo-European spiritual heritage, and thus was able to agreeably enrich and reconcile itself to the native cosmology and pantheon. Christianity by contrast, which from its inception was rooted in the spiritual animosity and iconoclastic religious hatred felt towards the polytheistic Roman world by the adherents of Judaism, sought to subvert, eradicate, and ultimately supplant the old organic folkways. Even as the new faith came to take on a predominantly Gentile constituency in the wake of the missionary work of Paul of Tarsus, these old hatreds persisted.⁷⁹ As one modern scholar, D. Jason Cooper, cogently put it: *“Mithraism sought to save the world of Rome. To this end, it applied its knowledge and expertise, seeking to purify traditions, and force a stricter moral order on a crumbling society. Christianity, by contrast, rejected the world of Rome. It did not consider Rome worthy of preservation... Mithraism could not survive the double blow of the collapse of Rome and the rise of the Christian church.”*⁸⁰

Unfortunately, because of the secrecy which enshrouded the jealously guarded secrets of the deeper spiritual teachings of the Roman Mithraic cult, much of what modern scholars and religious reconstructionists know stems from they have been able to glean from an assortment of inscriptions found upon various artifacts along with second hand accounts by various contemporary historians and polemicists. To some extent, those who have endeavored to look toward the comparative mythology of the god's Persian and Indian variants, have found some useful clues, yet in many ways the Roman cult is still unique and clearly distinguishable from the other two, which makes the loss of much of its doctrines all the more tragic. Regarding this difficulty which confounds the best intentions of scholars to completely and definitively reconstruct the inner doctrines of the Mithraic cult, the scholar G. R. S. Mead has written over a century ago: *“It is as though the living tradition and written records of Christianity had disappeared from the world for fifteen hundred years, and there remained to us only a few hundred monuments and the ruins of some three-score churches. What could we glean from these of the doctrines of the faith? How, from such meagre remains, could we reconstruct the story of the God, the saving doctrines, the rituals, the liturgies?”*⁸¹ Because of this, it will be the task of modern Mithraic revivalists to construct a living faith ultimately derivative of both Eastern and Western traditions.

The treachery of Constantine's apostasy, this betrayal of his People's venerable traditions, set in stage the process by which a fatal blow was dealt for much of what we once knew and held sacred. Our spiritual birthright was torn from us, and the greatness and light of our ancient folkways faded into obscurity. The followers of Mithras were to suffer no kinder a fate than any other pagan co-religionists within the vast expanse of the Empire, who represented the vestiges of the old order to the new hostile Judeo-Christian power structure.⁸² The emergence of the pagan Emperor Julian, who was himself an initiate of the Mithraic Mysteries, offered a momentary reprieve, but under his Christian successors this process of forced conversion and violent suppression became thorough in scope, forever changing and contorting the spiritual orientation of Europe.⁸³ So profound was the loyalty of Mithras' devotees that

⁷⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Volume 1, Abridged by D. M. Low, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), pp.182-196

⁸⁰ Cooper, p.39

⁸¹ Mead, p.14

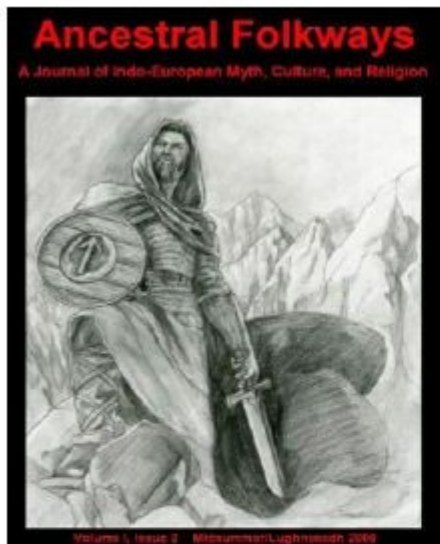
⁸² Clauss, 170

⁸³ Evola, p.21

they were willing to forfeit their own lives in the name of their god, favoring religious martyrdom over Christian conversion-- as evidenced by the skeletal remains of adherents found chained within various walled up Mithraic sanctuaries.⁸⁴ Indeed, his followers displayed unerring fidelity even to the end.



Pictured: Bas-relief depicting a Mithraic communion rite, from Konjica, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
Note the solar crosses marked on the host wafers. (From Cumont)



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⁸⁴ Angus, p.66